

May 7 / Administration of William J. Clinton, 2000

we can make America the safest big country on Earth.

NOTE: This statement was made available by the Office of the Press Secretary on May 5 but was

embargoed for release until 6:01 p.m. on May 7. It was also made available on the White House Press Office Actuality Line.

Remarks Following a Meeting With Million Mom March Organizers and an Exchange With Reporters

May 8, 2000

The President. Hello, everybody. I just finished a meeting with Attorney General Reno and Secretary Shalala and Chief of Staff Podesta, and I have met with all these folks, these women and their men supporters who are the organizers of the Million Mom March. They're going to be here and in over 60 other cities on Mother's Day, marching for commonsense gun safety legislation, asking Congress to act, building on the grassroots efforts that have brought success in the petition drive in Colorado and the Legislatures of Maryland, Massachusetts, and California.

And I think what they're doing is profoundly important. We in the administration want to do whatever we can to support them. They are taking a stand for their children. Many of them have lost loved ones. They have lost children. They have lost spouses. And there will be many more just like them who are here.

They want Congress to act on the commonsense gun legislation before it, and of course, they want Congress to go beyond that to licensing, registration. They have not proposed taking away anybody's gun. They have proposed making life a lot safer for the American people and their children. And I think what they're doing is a very noble and good thing. I hope it will prompt Congress to act.

It is unconscionable—it is now over a year after Columbine and over 10 months since they've had a chance to pass this legislation. And I hope their presence here will—and throughout the country—will be successful. I am quite sure they will succeed over the long run if they stay with it, because they represent the heavy majority of the American people, and they have borne a heavy burden in their own lives which they have been willing to put into this effort. And I'm very grateful to them.

Gun Safety Legislation

Q. What's stopping Congress from acting? At least pressure from the moms—

The President. Well, we'll see if this makes a difference. I think that the people in the gun lobby have historically been very effective. But I think that if you look at the specifics of the legislation before Congress, there's a huge majority of the American people for it. And I think what all these folks are going to remind them of on Mother's Day is that they're watching, and they want action.

And this is not an issue that can be dealt with in business as usual and buried for the—*[inaudible]*—interest groups. It needs to be resolved, and I hope it will be. And if it does, it will be far more because of them than because of us. The only way we can pass this is if people have to look into the eyes of parents who have lost their loved ones, if they have to look into the eyes of people who have lost their spouses, their brothers, their sisters, and answer, why don't we have this commonsense safety legislation; why is this the only area of our national life where we don't have prevention as our primary strategy?

They won't be able to answer that. You can't talk to these folks that have been talking to us this morning and answer that.

Death of John Cardinal O'Connor

Q. Mr. President, you're going to the funeral of Cardinal O'Connor today. Can you give us some thoughts this morning on his impact on America and religious life, and what his passing might mean for the future?

The President. Well, I'm going because he was a leader of the Catholics and the biggest Catholic diocese in the country and because, in particular, he was a devoted chaplain in the

armed services. And I feel particularly grateful for that. And of course, it will be up to the Church and to the Pope to decide his replacement and what happens after that. But I think he played a very large role in the life of the Church. Even when he was controversial and when he disagreed with me, I liked the fact that he was outspoken, and he stood up for what he believed in.

Middle East Peace Process

Q. Mr. President, the Israeli Foreign Minister said today that the Gaza is so big that it's clear that there's not going to be an interim framework agreement. Are you disappointed by that?

The President. I just disagree with it. I think there will be a framework agreement.

Q. By the deadline, sir?

The President. Well, maybe not by the deadline. But they thought they might trip the deadline a little. But I think we'll get an agreement, an overall agreement by September. And I think they'll get there. There are substantial gaps, but if they want to do it bad enough, they'll do it.

Zimbabwe

Q. Mr. President, can you comment on the situation in Zimbabwe with the farmers and squatters there?

The President. Well, I've got Ambassador Holbrooke over there now working on a lot of the troubles in Africa, including the situation in Zimbabwe, and I hope it can be worked out in a lawful manner. And I think it's quite sad what's going on because it's a very important country, and it's very important to South Africa and South Africa's future, as well as to the future of the people who live in Zimbabwe. And I hope we can get them—we can do something that will encourage them to return to a progressive and stable path. They're working at it.

Sierra Leone

Q. How about Sierra Leone?

The President. We're working now on what can be done to restore the vigor of the U.N.

peacekeeping mission there and make it work. It's very important. I spent a lot of time on that the last 4 or 5 days, and we're working on it.

Gun Safety Legislation

Q. You seem very subdued. Do you have a cold?

The President. No. I'm just—if you had been here talking to these people about all their children's lives and all that, you'd feel subdued, too. I mean, I feel very sad that I haven't been able to get this legislation voted on. I think this is a really big deal.

We've gotten—yesterday we got the crime statistics—crime down 8 years in a row, murder at a 30-year low. But it's still one of the most dangerous countries in the world, only because we have stubbornly refused to take prevention seriously when it comes to guns, to keep guns out of the hands of criminals and children. And we've had the crime rate come down 8 years in a row, so we now know we can turn the crime rate around. And the next big barrier to bring it way down and make this a really, really safe country is to take these commonsense preventative measures.

And yes, I am subdued. I'm frustrated, and I'm very sad because I don't want any more kids to die. And I want them to come here on Mother's Day, and I told them before you came in here that if they didn't get tired, they'd win this fight. I've been watching these kinds of issues all my life, and it's like civil rights or something where there's this huge organized resistance. But if they just keep at it, they're going to win. I think they should have won more already, and I'm going to do what I can to help them.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:15 a.m. in the Roosevelt Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Minister of Foreign Affairs David Levi of Israel; and U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Richard C. Holbrooke. A tape was not available for verification of the content of these remarks.